



MLK's Message Revisited

A few years back, I visited the Martin Luther King Center in Atlanta to ponder the legacy of this preacher in a remarkable American era. Although deeply inspired by his leadership, it struck me that, from a gospel perspective, there wasn't anything particularly heroic or "radical" about Dr. King's message. He simply acted out faithfulness to the Word of God. He knew that the preservation of economic prosperity for one group by structurally marginalizing another deeply grieved his God. In speaking truth to power, he merely gave voice to what the gospel proclaimed as true. King was simply being Christian.

Without diminishing King's greatness, I want to suggest that we largely prefer to revere him as a champion of civil rights rather than mere gospel servant. Might we put him on a pedestal as a way to lessen our own responsibility to speak truth to power in our own day? Do we reduce the truth to something safe and manageable to absolve us from the kind of sacrifice that the black church in Montgomery, Birmingham, and Selma endured in King's day?

How we "handle the truth" has serious implications for how the American church addresses racism today. We in the Christian community development and reconciliation business have our favorite books, whether Amos, Ephesians, or the Corinthian letters. We love cherry-picking the verses that proof-text our case about justice, but in doing so, we settle for a "sound-byte theology" that reveals our lack of theological curiosity. We assume we know all there is to know about the gospel and its imperatives.

But shallow theology leads to shallow ministry. This is evident in the

prevailing discourse on racial reconciliation, which remains entrenched in a theology that largely addresses sin at the personal, but not systemic, level. Racial reconciliation becomes reduced to a personal discipleship project, solvable through "befriending people of color," organizing multi-ethnic worship services, and ensuring that everyone's ethnic heritage is somehow incorporated and validated. We have training materials to decipher our personal bigotry, complete with benchmarks to measure our progress.

Helpful as these efforts may be, addressing racism at a purely interpersonal level leaves us blind to the larger powers and principalities at work. We celebrate cultural diversity, while overlooking our cultural idolatries. We seek to dismantle the racial divide, while failing to confront the powers that propagate it. We embrace reconciliation without addressing the larger systems and institutions that divide and destroy. In all our well-intended efforts, we remain blindly entangled in the deep roots of racism.

It matters to us that blacks and whites worship in the same room, but does it also matter that despite civil rights victories of 50 years ago, the household wealth of African Americans remains just over half of that of white Americans and jail sentences for blacks average six months longer than whites for the same crime? Can we "welcome the stranger in our midst" while allowing lawmakers to judge immigrants solely in terms of their benefit to the U.S. economy? Can we bring our kingdom allegiance to bear on our nationalistic foreign policy and its impact on the ethnic poor, despite being written off as "liberal" or "anti-American"?

I experienced this at a national Christian conference in 2003, where I sought to challenge the church's non-critical posture regarding the National Security Strategy that just had emerged from the White House. Harshly criticized for "blatantly politicizing the Iraq war," I grieved the fact that partisan

politics subverted the opportunity for us to reflect Christianly about an issue as critical as war and its profound cost on the most vulnerable.

King is thus an important model of one who transcended partisanship to speak prophetically about the interlocking systems of militarism, racism, and poverty. Protesting the Vietnam War, he was criticized by his own allies for drifting from the "more important" civil rights agenda. Confuting their criticism, he called attention to the disproportion of minorities in the military, the war-driven elimination of social programs, the inherent contradiction of integrating blacks and whites in combat and segregating blacks at home, and the brutal devastation of Asian villages in the name of "democracy."

Forty years later, we see the fine print of No Child Left Behind that gives the military unimpeded access to public high schools, which in urban centers consist of approximately 88 percent ethnic minority. We see recruiting strategies that employ, as lures, rap among African-Americans or "fast-track citizenship" among Latino immigrants. We see the Patriot Act that facilitates the profiling, questioning, and holding of hundreds of Arab American citizens without legal representation. We see the proliferation of detainment facilities and anti-immigrant policies that send dark and dehumanizing messages to our Mexican neighbors.

Understanding that racism is not only alive and well but also deeply embedded in larger systems, idolatries, and powers that hold our society captive, we must affirm with Dr. King our gospel allegiance that transcends nationalism and its self-defined goals, so that we might speak for "the victims of our nation and for those it calls enemy, for no document from human hands can make these humans any less our brothers." ■

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